The Symbol & the Real

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In the dim hours before the day could decide what it wished to be, when the world still hovered between promise and withdrawal, there moved two presences along the same unfolding path. One was the Real, though it bore no name of its own choosing, for it had endured without witness and learned the cost of being known. It moved with grave attentiveness, as ancient things do, placing its weight carefully upon the earth, breathing in time with the quiet negotiations of air and light. It did not hurry, nor did it linger, but received each moment as it arrived and released it when it passed. The other was the Symbol, and it named itself endlessly. Around it gathered meanings like garments layered for a colder season than ever came, plans unfolding before its feet could reach them, its futures continuously rehearsed until they lost all warmth. It moved not from where it stood but from where it imagined itself soon to be, and so its steps were always slightly misplaced, its balance always a little unsure. Though the Real and the Symbol shared the same ground and the same pale morning light touched them both, they did not inhabit the same time, and this difference, quiet and unquestioned, governed all.

The Real walked with the patience of stone warmed slowly by the morning sun, its attention resting fully upon the ground beneath it, the sounds that rose and fell around it, the trees that loomed overhead, and the subtle resistance and invitation of space itself. The Symbol walked encased in an invisible architecture of intention. It moved as though guided by lines drawn ahead of it rather than by the earth beneath its feet. Its gaze was seldom empty, for it was always filled with what must be prepared for, what else it could be doing, and what could go wrong if left unattended. This vigilance gave the Symbol a sense of purpose, even virtue, and it mistook constant tension for engagement with life. It did not notice the Real beside it, engaged without strain.

As the day gathered, the Symbol's movements grew increasingly elaborate. Its arms traced careful arcs through the air, not to touch but to clarify, organize, and demonstrate that

nothing had been overlooked. Its path curved and doubled back upon itself as though meaning might be found through repetition alone. Thoughts folded inward, each explanation giving birth to another, each justification calling forth further refinement. The Symbol felt industrious in this motion, assured that such activity must surely count for progress. The rooms through which it moved, however, remained unchanged. Chairs stood where they always stood. Light slid across traces of dirt on the floor in long, indifferent bands. Dust gathered patiently upon shelves that had listened to such explanations many times before. The Real adjusted itself quietly to these things, stepping where space allowed, pausing where stillness settled, and responding not to what might be but to what was. The Symbol, meanwhile, responded chiefly to itself, circling its own momentum like a bird that mistakes flight for arrival.

At times, the Real's gaze drifted outward, not away from the Symbol but beyond it, toward the wider breathing of the world. It rested upon trees that stood without asking to be understood, animals that moved according to laws older than language, and clouds negotiating their slow passage without regard for human urgency. This attention was calm, unannounced, and unmediated. It did not seek to extract meaning, nor did it refuse it; it simply listened. To the Symbol, this stillness appeared dangerous and aloof.

The Symbol demanded attention, but only in forms it could recognize. It called for presence, but only when presence arrived in speech, mirrored its expression, and aligned with the understanding the Symbol preferred. Attention that came through silence, shared stillness, or the simple act of being, did not count. Nor did attention given to the world itself register as anything but absence. Only what passed through the Symbol's chosen vocabulary, only what affirmed its narratives and rhythms, was accepted as real. All other modes of being were quietly excluded, not argued against but rendered invisible, as though reality itself were required to speak in a sanctioned tongue before it could be heard.

Attention that was not spoken felt like a kind of abdication to the Symbol. Listening without commentary felt like disapproval. The Symbol would tighten subtly when it sensed this widening of attention, drawing its thoughts inward, increasing their volition as though repetition would ward off this unease. It did not consider that its unease arose not from

absence, but from presence it could not control. The Real did not attempt to correct this misapprehension. It had learned that presence, once explained, is already lost.

As the hours wore on, restlessness took hold of the Symbol. Anxiety entered before it found any clear object; quickening its hands, tightening its shoulders, and sharpening its movement into sudden stops and starts. The Symbol began to move as though speed itself might resolve this growing dissonance. This acceleration demanded response, and the Real found itself at a threshold. Mirror the acceleration and be drawn into the Symbol's tightening orbit, or remain grounded and risk being perceived as unresponsive, withdrawn, or uncaring. Either path widened the distance between them. The Symbol's unease, unable to locate its true source, sought relief in attribution. Somewhere, something must be causing this discomfort, and so, as always, a cause was found beyond itself, convenient and absolving. Having named the source of its anxiety, the Symbol felt momentarily steadied, unaware that it had merely displaced its weight rather than lifted it.

The cost of this displacement soon appeared in material. The Symbol's glass slipped from its distracted hand, contents spilling across the table and down onto the floor. The liquid spread without ceremony, darkening wood and cloth alike, both indifferent to explanation. For a moment, the Symbol stood frozen, unwilling to accept the simple truth that its body had not been where it thought it was. Blame hovered in the air, searching for its victim. The Real noticed the spill immediately, not as failure but as fact, already adjusting to the altered space. The Symbol, however, restored balance by invention, assigning cause, context, and culprit with practiced ease. It was the Real's hand, or some passerby, that knocked the glass from the Symbol's hand, not a simple slip. Order was preserved under the guise of narrative, even as the floor bore silent witness to the true cost. This dance continued, now subtly misaligned, the world absorbing what abstraction would not.

As afternoon softened and light began to lose its edge, the Real stepped closer. There was no declaration in this movement, no preparation or appeal. An embrace; simply, bodily, and without interpretation or demand. For a fleeting moment, alignment was possible. The Symbol pereceived the contact, warm and familiar, yet its attention had already slipped. The faint glow from a small screen drew its gaze, its thumb tracing patterns that led nowhere

present. The embrace passed like sunlight through glass, warming without touching. Contact had been offered, freely and fully. It had not been returned.

Absence eventually became practical. Things began to go missing, as they often do when attention is divided against itself. Keys were lost, or so it seemed. The Symbol searched with increasing urgency, its thoughts scattering in all directions at once. Thoughts flickered through its mind, each idea clamoring for attention. Future plans loomed perpetually, an ever-receding horizon of order that never quite arrived. The search grew frantic but remained unfocused. Drawers opened and closed without memory. Surfaces were accused and absolved in quick succession. Time compressed, the present moment narrowing into an obstacle to be overcome rather than a place to stand. The Real was summoned, not as companion but as function, to help with the search and to open the door when the Symbol returned, lest anything delay them further. The Real moved calmly through the space, attentive to what was actually there rather than to what was feared to be missing.

Then, the Symbol stopped. Its movement paused. Its frantic choreography collapsed into stillness. Thought loosened its grip, if only for a breath. Despair set in. Its eyes lowered, not in search but in surrender. And suddenly, the keys were noticed, right where they had been left moments earlier. Relief surged across the Symbol, swift and unexamined. No curiosity followed, no question arose as to why stopping had succeeded where searching had failed. The moment passed, its lesson unclaimed, and the Symbol resumed its forward motion as though nothing of consequence had occurred.

Evening approached, and the Symbol returned to the idea of presence. It gestured toward it with care, tracing its outline through metaphor and abstraction. Presence was described, even praised as an ideal, but rendered so precisely as to become practice, not participation. The body remained unnamed. Metaphor stacked upon metaphor until the sterility of abstraction obscured the vitality of flesh. The Real sat, breathing steadily, weighted in its body, available without condition. No contact occurred. The distance between them acquired the air of ritual, a space maintained not by resistance but by habit.

As they moved through the street, the world was settling into itself, loosening the last taut knots of the day. The Real listened to music threading softly through the air, footsteps striking

pavement in steady measure, the city exhaling as light withdrew from stone and glass. Sound arrived and passed without demand, and the Real received it as one receives weather. The Symbol, meanwhile, filled the space with elsewhere, its presence stretched thin across imagined urgencies. Speech poured forward without pause, a continuous bridge to moments not yet lived, broken only by the sending of messages into a future that never arrived as expected. Attention was never allowed to rest, never permitted to sink into the body or the ground beneath it. Two rhythms shared the sidewalk. One moving with the cadence of breath and step, the other skimming just above the moment, unanchored. Though they walked side by side, only one belonged to the earth that carried them.

The Symbol longed, endlessly, for presence. It spoke of it often, planned for it carefully, explained it beautifully. It imagined that one day, when conditions were right, it would finally arrive where it had always intended to be. But this arrival never came, not because the path was obscure or the desire insincere, but because arrival required an act the Symbol had learned to fear. Stopping. To receive presence would mean standing still long enough to notice where one was, to feel the weight of the moment without immediately converting it into narrative. And so, the day closed as it had begun, the Real remaining unchanged, unhidden, and quietly enduring. The Symbol reaching forward, just beyond the moment that waited exactly where it had always been.